

# Bible Characters - Stephen

by John McGregor

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*The sermon teaches us that eternity is more valuable than this life, the work of God is always opposed, service is costly, and don't leave any unfinished business.*

**Duration:** 29:29

**Scripture:** Psalm 84:11, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 10:22, Acts 6:8, Hebrews 12:2, 1 Peter 5:8, Revelation 21:4

**Topics:** "Forgiveness", "Discipleship"

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## Description

In this sermon, Ralph Burnham shares the story of Martin and Gracia Burnham, who were held captive by the Abu Sayyaf terrorist group for 376 days. Despite the uncertainty of their survival, Martin maintained a willingness to serve the Lord with gladness. The sermon emphasizes the importance of forgiveness and not leaving any unfinished business, drawing parallels between the lives of Stephen and Jesus. Burnham also shares the story of Gordon Wilson, who lost his daughter in a bombing but chose to forgive those responsible. The sermon concludes with a call to be sold out to Christ, with no turning back and no regrets.

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## Transcript

I want to speak this morning about a man who believes that one day in God's courts is better than a thousand anywhere else. His name is Stephen, and you will find him in Acts chapter six, and I'm going to read verses eight through fifteen, and then we want to look at what can Stephen teach us this morning. Acts six, verse eight says, Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.

Opposition arose, however, from members of the synagogue of the freedmen, as it was called, Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria, as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the spirit by whom he spoke. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, We've heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.

So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him to the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses and testified, This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.

For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs of Moses handed down to us. All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Father, this is your word.

And God, we have gathered to meet with you. Be pleased to take full charge in these few moments, to take your word, to bless it to our hearts and lives, to teach us and touch us, and to bring us again to the one who has loved us and given himself for us, even Jesus Christ. So, Father, bless this time in Jesus' name.

Amen. You ever watch the sky at night and see a meteor streak through the sky? At one moment there's nothing, and then there's a bright glaze as it goes, and then it's gone. That's a little bit like a picture of the life of what we know of the life of Stephen, one of the first deacons of the church from Acts chapter 6. A man who received grace from God.

In fact, it's recorded he was full of grace and the Holy Spirit. In Psalm 84, in some versions it says, you will give me grace and afterward receive me into glory. That was Stephen's experience.

God gave him grace and then received him into glory. He is the first martyr of the church, a lay person chosen to serve the people of God, involved in spreading the gospel and the power of God is at work as we've read there in Acts chapter 6. And just very briefly this morning, I want to think about four things that the life of Stephen teaches us. And may God grant us the grace to apply them in our days and times.

First of all, I believe he teaches us that eternity is more valuable than this life. Eternity is more valuable than this life. We tend to put all our value on the things that we can see and know.

Stephen put all his value on the things that he didn't see, but he knew by faith. He knew that trusting in Christ would give him that eternal life and carry him on. He belonged, you see, to the Lord Jesus Christ.

His life testified to it. He refused to compromise. And you know, there's an awful lot of that that goes on these days.

Just so that we can get along. Sometimes we give up vital Christian principles. He would not compromise the truth.

In fact, in holy boldness, he proclaims it because he knew the truth of Psalm 84:10, that better is one day in God's house than thousands elsewhere. He led down his life rather than disgrace the Lord Jesus Christ. We live in a day and time when everybody wants their own way.

But this world in due time will come to a time which is a millennial kingdom of Jesus, when it will be only his way. And all will be broken on that foundation stone of Jesus Christ. Sometimes, you know, we want our own way to such an extent that we would break lives and families and hearts and churches and everything else, just so I can be right.

Stephen wasn't like that. He knew that Christ was right. And gave diligence in his life that everything that he would say and do would honor the Lord Jesus Christ.

You'll find in your bulletin this morning an invitation to defend heterosexual marriage. Why is that? That's because in our society, everybody wants what they want. Give me my own way, and I'll be happy.

But in the millennia that the earth has endured, when humanity has had its own way, far from developing happiness, it has developed all kinds of misery in every direction. You see, true happiness only comes when we come under the authority and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It's so easy to be intimidated these days, isn't it? After all, if all the experts say something is so, is it not so? Well, if the Bible says it's not so, it's not so.

I love the character of Stephen because he wasn't intimidated. There he stands before the earthly power, the ecclesiastical power of his day, at the end of the sixth chapter of Acts of the Apostles. All the weight of human intelligence is there, but there is no spirit that could overcome the Holy Spirit that lived in this man.

He was what we would call fully surrendered. In fact, sometimes we sing a hymn about that, don't we? Fully surrendered, Lord I would be. And here's an example of what that looks like in the life of Stephen.

There have been many other martyrs since then, men who've displayed, women who've displayed great courage under all kinds of fire, who would not let go of eternity in order to build some foolish compromise upon the face of this terrestrial ball that we live on called the earth. There was an old time preacher called Polycarp, 87 years old, in the days of the Roman Empire. And the Roman leader of that area called him in and said, Deny Jesus and you can live.

If you don't deny him, I'll feed you to the lions. Polycarp, 87. Now that's the time when most of us say, hey, I done my bit.

Let some of them young fellas pick this up. He didn't say that. He just smiled at that Roman proconsul and said, Bring on the beasts.

Oh, you despise the lions, said the Roman. Then I'll feed you to the fire. I'll burn you.

Polycarp said, The flames that you can ignite can last only for a few minutes. But the flames where you are going, if you are outside of Christ, last forever. He had his focus where Stephen had his focus on the eternal things.

You know why we lose the battle for the family today? We've lost the foundations. We need to come back to what this book teaches us about principles and about following Christ and about heaven and hell. And we need to get a celestial fix on Christ.

He is our eternal goal. And worry an awful lot less about what goes on here. We learn that eternity is more valuable than this life.

From Stephen, secondly, we learn that the work of God is always opposed. Opposition arose in verse 9. We don't like opposition. We don't like confrontation.

This year I pass a sort of a milestone. I'll have lived more of my life in Canada than I did in Northern Ireland. And so I can say I'm Canadian, I believe.

And we pride ourselves on being non-confrontational and working things out. Dear friends, there are some things that we must confront. Evil is meant to be confronted.

Churches in this day and time and Christians in this day and time need to take a stand for the truth and for that which is right. This is true in Stephen's life. And we do it gracefully, but we do it in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It has always been so. You go back to some of the great revivals. For instance, a convert to Methodism in the 1750s, his name was Bell.

He made all kinds of claims for himself and his followers. He claimed that they had attained absolute perfection. Finally, Wesley excluded Bell and his followers.

Bell went on to predict the end of the world with God's judgment on February 28, 1763. But the world did not end. You see, he had done severe damage to the cause of Christ.

We need to stand in the cause of Jesus Christ. It wasn't John that changed any of these lives this morning. It was Jesus.

It is Jesus only who changes hearts and lives and homes. People want religion. God demands a relationship.

Truth is always opposed with lies. There are always lies because we read about the father of lies. Go with me to John's Gospel, the eighth chapter.

John chapter 8, verses 42 through 47. Jesus said to them, When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me.

As you look at this passage, here is Jesus saying the devil's told lies from the beginning. One of the greatest things I think that happens in these days is that too often we believe them. Last week, David Mace said his father said to him, you are useless.

It's the devil's lie. But he believed it. Other times, well you can't accomplish anything.

You better not say anything for Jesus because you'll get toasted. It's the devil's lie. Truth is always opposed with lies.

Jesus spoke about that. Even in John 14, verse 6, he says, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father but by me.

One way. Yet we live in a world that says there are many ways. We must not be afraid to stand up and say, Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life.

So we learn eternity is more valuable than this life. The work of God is always opposed, always has been, always will be. Thirdly, we learn that service is costly from the life of Stephen.

Stephen desired to serve God by serving his people. And it cost him this life. You know, there's no nice way to say this, so I'll just say it.

Part of the trouble with modern day Christianity is we're not challenged. We're not challenged at all to serve Christ all the way. But pastor, you don't understand.

The church hurt me. I can't serve Him anymore. Grow up.

There is much more at stake than your ego or mine or anything else. We are in desperate days. Days when we need to get our act together and come before God and find Him again in all His power.

You see that little thing in your bulletin says that on the 29th of July, the court will make a decision about whether or not same-sex marriages are okay. You didn't hear a thing about it until you saw it in your bulletin this morning. Why is that? That's because the opposition are organized and the opposition are not fighting amongst themselves and they're not frittering away things on meaningless issues.

This is a day and a time for you and I as children of God to take a lesson from the life of Stephen and say, it's time to stand. I sometimes do this when I'm counseling. I don't think I've ever done it when I'm preaching, but let me ask this question.

If I could take you to the morgue today and we could go in and pull back the blanket on one of those corpses and I give you a huge big needle. The kind that we're all scared of but hate to admit it. And I said to you, stick that needle in that corpse and you did it.

What would the reaction be? Sharon says, no reaction. Dr. McBride helped me out. What would be the reaction? No reaction.

Why is that? It's dead. I am crucified with Christ. Nevertheless I live.

But it is not me. It is Christ that lives in me. For he loved me and gave himself for me.

Service is costly. I don't think we've ever seen a day and time like today where there are so many complaints about things and about church and about this and about that. What happened to that old call and challenge? Lay down your life at the foot of the cross.

I think there's a modern song that addresses it. It says, any road at any cost. Maybe it was Steve Green that wrote it.

Whatever happened to that? You see, that is foundational. And unless we can come to that, then all of the church in all of its glory will just be a big internal fight over nothing. And eternity will slide on by.

It used to be that our pulpits thundered with the need to surrender self. And it's time that they did again. And I'm not apologizing for pounding the pulpit and screaming and shouting in my Irish way up here this morning.

It is time to come back out of that little cocoon and face the enemy in the power of the Spirit. Most of us want to see great churches and revival and all the rest. And I'm convinced it'll never happen until we're willing to pay the price.

And the price is the same as Stephen's. Lay down your life and let Christ. What is it costing me to follow Him? I'm not talking about dollars.

He owns the cattle on a thousand hills and the wealth in every mine. He is never short and He is never late. I remember doing a crusade in Camrose, Alberta, training the committee.

And I mentioned to them there'd be a hotel bill for the evangelist and for a couple of us with him. And one guy said, huh, sure seems like you guys are well looked after. You know, you've got to come up with all the money for this thing.

What's it costing you? And I looked him right eye to eye and said, well, it depends. Would you say it's costly to be on the road 307 days this year? Would you say it's costly not to be at home when family is sick

or hurting? And all of a sudden it got quiet. The dollars are never the issue.

It's who is God and who am I before Him. Let me read to you a little thing I find this week so interesting on this subject. Thus, in a week before Martin Burnham's abduction by Muslim guerrillas on a Philippine island of Palawan in May 2001, the New Tribes missionary gave a devotional at the Wednesday night evening service at Rose Hill Bible Church in his small hometown outside Wichita, Kansas.

Some of Burnham's last words in the United States were also the last words of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of John. Martin's uncle, during the service at the church held in honor of Martin, said his very last words were, follow thou me. Ralph Burnham said his voice was choking.

Martin not only spoke of following him, but he took on that responsibility. And of course at that time neither he nor any of us expected how far he was going to be required to go. But he was willing to go.

Martin Burnham, 42, kept that attitude throughout the 376 days he and his wife Gracia, 43, were held captive by Abu Sayyaf terrorist group. Just before the Philippine military rained on the kidnappers that led to Martin's death and Gracia's freedom, the two huddled together in a hammock under a makeshift tent. Martin and Gracia had really been thinking that there would be a chance that they would not make it out alive.

The Bible says, to serve the Lord with gladness, Martin told Gracia, let's go all the way. Costly. Service is costly.

Fourth thing, last thing. Don't leave any unfinished business. We find this so clearly in the life of Stephen.

Chapter 7 of Acts and verse 16. Then he fell on his knees and cried out, Lord do not hold this sin against them. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Forgiveness, forgiveness. Don't leave any unfinished business. Who was Stephen like when he died? Well, in Luke 23, 34, we read Jesus said this as they put the nails in his hands and feet.

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they did. He was just like his master all the way. So many wrongs perpetrated, forgive.

So many things that should be sorted out, forgive. Stephen entered the presence of Christ, cleansed and free. In 1986, there was a bomb in Oma in Northern Ireland.

Some of you may remember the incident. Eleven were killed, 69 were injured. The bomb went off in a street full of people, market town.

The IRA claimed responsibility. In the rubble lay Gordon Wilson, his 14-year-old daughter Maria. Maria stretched out her hand in the midst of all that debris and she managed to touch her dad's hand and hold it.

And she said, Daddy, I really love you. And she was gone. Gordon was pulled out of that rubble.

And through good medical help, he was patched up. Protestant terrorists promised a response. Look what they did to us.

We'll go out and nail them. Now that's Irish. And maybe that's Israeli.

And maybe that's Arab. And maybe that's Chechen. And I could go on, Indian and Pakistani.

But you see, Gordon and Maria and his family, they knew the Lord Jesus. And Gordon went to those Protestant terrorists and said to them, Don't do it. Don't disgrace the memory of the dead by heading back like that.

And they didn't. One man, a grocer, 1995, Gordon went home to be with the Lord Jesus all over the United Kingdom. It was a tribute to him.

You know what the newspaper said? The man who taught us how to forgive. And if Gordon was here today, he'd say, That's not Gordon Wilson. That's Jesus Christ.

That's Stephen. That's those who have no agenda, but his. Ah, there's so much we can learn from these great characters in Scripture.

Wish I had a lot more time. We need to close. And let me close this way.

Are you ready to learn the lesson of Stephen, sold out to Christ? No turning back. No regrets.

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